

In brief

Cough syrup kills 22 in Panama:

Twenty two people in Panama have died after taking a cough syrup made in a government laboratory (www.nytimes.com, 16 Oct, "A killer in a medicine bottle shakes faith in government"). The syrup was found to contain diethylene glycol.

Black Londoners' mental health problems could be treated better:

African and Caribbean people in London are 1.6 times more likely to use specialist mental health services than white people and more likely to be admitted to psychiatric and medium secure units, says a report from the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health (*The Costs of Race Inequality*, www.scmh.org.uk).

Health in Sierra Leone is still at "disaster levels":

Five years after a devastating civil war Sierra Leone's health conditions are still at "disaster levels," says Médecins Sans Frontières. The charity's report shows crude mortality of 1.8 deaths per 10 000 people a day (*Lessons from Pain: Treating Sierra Leone's Endless Health Emergency*, www.msf.org).

Health care takes largest slice of UN emergency fund:

The health sector accounted for 34% of the \$77m (£41m; €61m) in grants disbursed between March and October by the new UN central emergency response fund to 16 countries—mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa—with underfunded humanitarian crises. So far \$273m has been pledged to the fund, of which \$70m has come from the UK, the largest donor.

UK transplantation services are overstretched:

A report from an all party parliamentary group has called on the government to overhaul transplantation services (*More Transplants, Saving More Lives*, www.kidney.org.uk).

Chief medical officer answers doctors' questions:

Listeners to *BMJ Audio* can hear Liam Donaldson respond to doctors' queries on issues ranging from the amount of influence he has over the health secretary, Patricia Hewitt, to the dismantling of the GMC. The interview is accessible at bmj.com/audio.

Southall faces further hearing—on secret medical records

Owen Dyer *London*

The paediatrician David Southall is facing a disciplinary hearing at the General Medical Council next month, over charges that his methods "amounted to keeping secret medical records" on two children in his care.

The hearing, announced by the GMC on Tuesday (17 October), is in addition to one already being considered after a Court of Appeal ruled that the GMC should have investigated a separate complaint made against Professor Southall (*BMJ* 2005;331:1426).

The GMC has now said that it will look into separate accusations that Professor Southall failed to act in the children's best interests and that he did not treat their mothers "in a way which respected their privacy and dignity."

The council will also look into allegations that, in preparing a report for a local authority on care proceedings involving another child, Professor Southall "acted in a way which was inappropriate, added to the distress

of a bereaved person and was an abuse of his professional position."

The hearing came to light after the Liberal Democrat MP John Hemming tabled an early day motion in the House of Commons on 9 October, asking Professor Southall's employer, the University Hospital of North Staffordshire NHS Trust, to release thousands of special case files—including videotapes and DVDs—to be added to patients' medical records.

However, the files compiled by Professor Southall will not be released to patients' families unless they request them, the Department of Health has decided. The health department said that researchers were obliged to contact patients and provide information from clinical studies only if the data contain information that was clinically relevant to the patient. Patients may still request that their special case files be added to their medical records.

However, it emerged that the files were "likely to be discussed


at an imminent GMC hearing into Professor Southall's work," said the trust. Only then did the GMC announce details of the imminent hearing.

Mr Hemming said that Professor Southall holds information on "four or five thousand" patients, many of whom are unaware of the existence of the files.

Mr Hemming said he took up the issue after being contacted by a constituent from his Birmingham Yardley constituency and by other former patients and parents of children treated by Professor Southall.

The GMC suspended Professor Southall from child protection work for three years in September 2004, after he accused the husband of Sally Clark of murdering their son Christopher on the basis of a television programme he had seen on the case. Mrs Clark had been acquitted of the crime on appeal.

Professor Southall already faces a GMC investigation into his research on continuous negative extrathoracic pressure ventilation in the early 1990s.

The hearing announced this week is expected to begin on 13 November. The other hearing has not yet been scheduled. 

Violence against children is widespread

John Zarocostas *Geneva*

A United Nations report on violence against children says that each year more than 50 000 children are killed as a result of homicide. Millions are subjected to physical and psychological abuse, discrimination, neglect, maltreatment, and sexual exploitation.

The report says, however, that much of this violence "remains hidden" or unreported and asserts that its figures underestimate the problem.

Nevertheless the data assembled by the independent expert, Sérgio Pinheiro, who founded the Center for the Study of Violence at the University of São Paulo, show that the problem is widespread and pervasive.




A Chinese child chained by his parents to stop him playing video games

worldwide in 2002 as a result of homicide," the report says.

However, Professor Pinheiro, who prepared the study for the UN secretary general, also pointed out that studies on non-fatal violence have shown that "for every youth homicide there are around 20 to 40 victims of non-fatal youth violence requiring hospital treatment."

The acting chief of WHO, Anders Nordström, said: "No matter whether it occurs in the family, in the school, community, institution or workplace, health workers are at the front in responding to violence against children."

The report also says that studies from many countries and regions indicate that up to 98% of children suffer physical punishment in their homes and that about a third of these children are punished with implements. 

Report of the Independent Expert for the United Nations is at www.violencestudy.org.